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The Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce: A Critical Introduction, by Robert Almeder

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Robert Almeder, *The Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce: A Critical Introduction*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980. 205 pp. $27.50.

Review by Michael L. Raposa

When Charles Peirce died in September of 1914, his philosophical writings lay in a state of chaos, the vast majority of them unpublished and unknown. Contemporary scholarship bears witness to the dramatic change in that situation. Each year new studies emerge lending coherence to the fragmented system that Peirce bequeathed to us, clarifying the problematic aspects of his thought and drawing out the implications of certain undeveloped notions and arguments. Despite the massive amount of material now available on Peirce, the task has barely begun. Many of his writings still remain unpublished in manuscript form. His contributions in aesthetics and the philosophy of religion have never been systematically explored, nor has his relationship to Hegel and the German idealists ever been adequately assessed. Much has been accomplished, but the possibilities for future research are both numerous and exciting.

Robert Almeder's book serves both as an example of the excellent work that is being done in Peirce scholarship and as an indication that crucial problems still remain to be solved. While the subtitle of the book designates it as "A Critical Introduction" to Peirce's thought, it is hardly an introduction in any unqualified sense of the word. Almeder makes no attempt to be comprehensive in his treatment of Peirce's philosophy; the scope and significance of Peirce's contributions to the various philosophical disciplines are never assessed, and Almeder focuses only on the most "mature" phase of his thought, those writings dating from 1890. This study is primarily concerned with a central problem confronting the interpreter of Peirce's "system": how is one to deal with the ambiguity created by Peirce's characterization of himself as both a "realist" and an "idealist"? Scholars have long disagreed about whether or not both of these designations can be meaningfully applied to Peirce and, if not, about which is more appropriate. Almeder's work represents an attempt to "resolve" this "long-standing controversy" (p. vii).

The book commences with a lengthy and illuminating analysis of Peirce's epistemology. Embedded in this discussion is an interesting defense of Peirce's pragmatism against the critique of it by W.V.O. Quine: one of the key arguments here involves the claim that Quine's theory of knowledge, unlike that of Peirce, is not able to accomodate talk about abstract entities. Almeder's basic purpose in this section,

however, is to convince the reader that Peirce can be consistently regarded only as an epistemological realist. This argument is developed in the first three chapters of the book, where he gathers evidence to support the contention that Peirce was committed to a belief in the existence of real objects external to the knowing mind.

Almeder then approaches, in chapter 4, the task of characterizing Peirce's "idealism." He concludes that Peirce was not, at any point in the development of his thought, an epistemological idealist (p. 153). Rather, Peirce rejected the notion that "unto eternity there will be competing alternative theories, no one better in principle than the other; and hence what the real world is can never be known" (p. 98). For Peirce, the real world is knowable, and it is not dependent for its reality on the mental activity of the knowing subject. Consequently, either Peirce was inaccurate in labeling himself as an idealist or he was an idealist of a different sort. Almeder chooses the latter option, and he proceeds to describe Peirce's metaphysical system as an exemplification of "objective idealism," the belief that all of reality is Mind (pp. 154-56).

It seems clear that this is a correct characterization of Peirce's thought, and Peirce did, in fact, identify himself as an objective idealist. More significant, however, are both the epistemological considerations that have preceded this conclusion and the several analyses that follow it. In chapter 5, Almeder extends his discussion to the topic of Peirce's "Scotism." Having identified Peirce as a realist, he is anxious to determine the extent to which Peirce's thought is compatible with the philosophical realism of Duns Scotus. Almeder immediately notes that, even if such a compatibility does exist, it will illuminate Peirce's "logical realism" (his solution to the problem of universals) and not his "epistemological realism" (his belief in the independent reality of known objects). Almeder's conclusions here are largely negative, however. Scotus' effect on Peirce's thought was mainly "inspirational" (p. 180). Peirce's categories do not correspond to the fundamental concepts of Scotus' philosophy, and Peirce's "extreme realism" differs radically from Scotus' own "moderate" proposal.

It is not clear that this analysis is either accurate or adequate enough. Peirce himself cautioned that his admiration for Scotus was

not a slavish devotion. Given the stature of Peirce's own genius, one can expect that many of Scotus' concepts will have been creatively developed and transformed within the context of Peirce's pragmaticism. At the same time, there seems to be a good deal of continuity between these two systems of thought, especially when one takes into account the six centuries of vital philosophical activity that intervened. One example of this continuity is the relationship between Scotus' "real essence" and Peirce's notion of "habit." Almeder identifies the former with a static, "embodied quality" and the latter with a thing's "behavior" or "activities" (pp. 165, 181, note 14), but neither characterization seems to be satisfactory. In fact, Scotus described the essence of a thing as that which causes it to be the kind of thing that it is, and to be disposed to behave in the way that such things typically behave. Likewise, for Peirce the essence of a thing is its "habit of behavior," the dispositional law that governs the way that it will tend to behave under certain specifiable circumstances. In the first chapter of the book, Almeder himself observes that for Peirce beliefs have a habit-function, and that statements about beliefs are statements about "dispositions" to behave, not about "actual behavior" (pp. 2-3). Here, that insight seems either lost or confused, and the difficulty is compounded by an unimaginative rendering of Scotus' position.

Immediately after labeling Peirce as an objective idealist in chapter 4, and again in the book's conclusion, Almeder suggests that, even if he has effectively described Peirce's position, that position is one that cannot be maintained: the point is being made that one cannot consistently be both an epistemological realist and an objective idealist. This conclusion is disappointing especially since Almeder has already suggested that the perspectives of realism and idealism are not *per se* incompatible (p. 79). Furthermore, the argument advanced to support it seems inconclusive: Almeder asks "how there can be an Absolute and something which the Absolute is not."

This last dilemma curiously resembles that nagging and ageless philosophical problem concerning the relationship between the one and the many. It is doubtful that Peirce solved this problem but it would be interesting to know more about how he tried, or to

speculate about how he might have tried. A comparison between Hegel and Peirce would be illuminating in this regard, as would a closer look at the key religious notions that exercised a subtle influence over Peirce's thinking about the Absolute Mind. Of course, Almeder never set out to accomplish these tasks, and he has clearly, given the specific goals that he prescribed for himself, written an excellent book and drawn some sturdy conclusions.